

**Childcare Learning Centers, Inc.**

**Testimony on HB 5004**

**Office of Early Childhood Budget**

"Increasing the employability and stability of parents reduces the impact of poverty on children and sustains our nation's workforce and economy" (CCDBG guidance, 2015)

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Members of the Committee:

Introduction: my name is Carol Sargent and I am the Director of the School Readiness Programs at Childcare learning centers, Inc. in Stamford, CT. First a general remark on the Governor's proposed budget. We are opposed to the concept of "block grants" to the state agencies. This approach gives too much discretion to the state bureaucracy and leaves programs with no idea of what funding will be appropriated. Imagine trying to make payroll, retain a quality workforce, and try and recruit children to our programs in this budget scenario? It's not workable and very unfair to providers and families.

I have worked at the Childcare learning Centers, Inc. for 34 years. I started out as a Head Teacher, promoted to Education Coordinator and then Director. I have devoted my career working with low-income families and staff.

We serve nearly 1,000 families who are below the 75% SMI and cannot afford increased fees. A majority of the families are English language learners. Preference is given to families that are homeless, children with special needs, or has DCF involvement. We are subject to the fee schedule set by the state and limited in finding additional funding. We are the first line of defense for helping families out of poverty

Currently, we are facing a budget deficit and have been working on creative ways to raise funds elsewhere. We have been working very hard to make sure we can meet the 2020 deadline for all of our Teachers to have a Bachelor's Degree. We pay for their tuition, books, and college fees. They just cannot afford to do this on their own with the salaries we can offer. A teacher with 20 years of experience and a bachelor's degree is currently earning \$30,000 to \$35,000 per year. Most staff pay a substantial portion of medical insurance in many programs.

We also suffer from budget challenges from the Child and Adult Food Program. Although we keep very efficient meal counts it is difficult to know how many children may be absent, choose not to eat breakfast, or if we are closed unexpectedly for weather related issues.

Lack of appropriate state and federal funding of our programs has resulted in an economic crisis for the nearly 200 teachers, assistants, and support staff necessary to keep our doors open. Despite this situation, we continue to provide high quality NAEYC accredited programming to our families.

In addition, the cost of preschool is estimated at \$12,000-\$15,000 per child yet the reimbursement is \$8,670.

Both the new federal Early Learning Challenge Grant program (which won the state \$12.5 million this year) and the state Smart Start program require that classroom teachers be paid the same as teachers in the local public schools. Connecticut state law requires that 100% of our teachers must have a bachelor's degree by 2020. We know that quality teachers with early childhood credentials and degrees are important for the high quality programs we offer. Yet we pay many of our current staff less than half of the starting salary for Connecticut teachers. This creates a dual system of early care and education and is counter to the goals of the creation of the Office of Early Childhood. One system!

We are small businesses that contribute to the overall economy, and a vital "infrastructure" to the Connecticut economy. Child care needs a "lock box" and is just as important as the transportation infrastructure needed to get people to work. Research is clear that lost work hours for unreliable child care have a negative impact on the economy. (Report from the President's Council of Economic Advisors, benefits include increased parental earnings and employment; and long term gains for children's growth and development)

The Governor challenges us to leverage shrinking resources and set priorities for funding. We offer the following ideas on how to cut spending at the Office of Early Childhood and focus on direct services to children and families:

1. Focus on quality childcare for working parents:  
There should be a temporary moratorium on new slots to be allocated for any preschool program. Funding in the budget for those new slots should be repurposed to maintain and augment reimbursement rates to increase wages to stabilize the child care industry.
2. Reduce funding for expansion of the Quality Improvement System and focus on direct services to children and families. State Funded Centers are required to be NAEYC accredited and teachers must have BA degrees by 2020. Extending Quality Improvement measures (QIS) to all child care settings stretches scarce resources and should be delayed until appropriate dollars are put into the system.
3. Establish equity among all state early childhood programs including those offered by local school districts relative to rates, requirements, parent fees, data collection, etc.
4. Delay implementation of costly regulations in the new State Child Care Plan. CT relies on the Child Care Development Block Grant, known as Care4Kids, to fund child care in all types of settings: state funded centers; family child care; and kith and kin.
5. Do not allow funds to be cut from programs. Additional staff was added to the OEC to the licensing division to increase inspections. Many of our programs have been in existence for a very long time and we found the bi-annual inspections to be adequate.

OEC's proposed State Child Care Plan is very ambitious and costly and will take dollars from direct services. The Plan seeks to have all providers in all settings get comprehensive background checks; obtain state licenses; limit the number and hours of non-licensed care givers; require inspections yearly and mandate 18 hours of training for providers.

Again, without new dollars, these new regulations will take dollars from direct services. Recommend delaying implementation of the plan until new dollars are put into the system. (Note: currently licensed providers get background checks, proposed regs would

extend to any resident living in the home of a kith and kin provider, but a relative care giver of a child would still be exempt.)

In summary, State Funded Child Development Centers provide a core service to working families in Connecticut and without these programs families would be hard pressed to find affordable, quality child care. Both economic studies and child development brain research confirm the critical role quality child care plays in society. We urge you to maintain your role in the budget process and keep control over line items to ensure transparency and accountability in the process. Thank you for your consideration of these remarks.

Sincerely,

Carol Sargent

Director – State Funded Programs